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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000246

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [IQ](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: SARG FM MUALLEM'S VISIT

REF: A. ANKARA 222

- [1](#)B. DAMASCUS 000017
- [1](#)C. 06ANKAA6617
- [1](#)D. 06ANKARA6563

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice Weiner for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The February 1 visit of SARG FM Muallem to Ankara was the latest in a series of high level visits in both directions in recent months. Muallem's day of high-level meetings did not break any apparent new ground but focused primarily on ways the GOT and SARG could cooperate with other regional partners to help stabilize Iraq, as well as to support Iraq's independence and territorial integrity. Muallem also reportedly conveyed SARG fears of growing instability and sectarianism throughout the Middle East and its efforts to address those issues in Lebanon and with Palestinian factions. END SUMMARY

SYRIAN FM MUALLEM'S VISIT

[1](#)2. (C) According to MFA Department Head for the Middle East Sedat Onal, Muallem's visit was planned on very short notice and at the initiative of the SARG. Muallem met with his counterpart, FM Abdullah Gul, as well as with President Sezer and PM Erdogan. The meetings with Sezer and Erdogan had ostensibly been scheduled to allow Muallem to convey messages from President Asad to them directly concerning regional issues, including Iraq and the growing level of sectarian polarization throughout the Middle East.

[1](#)3. (C) Onal said Muallem shared with GOT officials the results of recent visits to Damascus by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and passed on Bashar Asad's hope for continued sharing and coordination of ideas on a regional basis in an effort to diminish growing sectarianism. Apparently without irony, Muallem reportedly pointed to Iraq and Lebanon as examples of the havoc that could engulf the entire region should Middle Eastern leaders not begin to discuss ways to avoid such a conflagration. Muallem also conveyed Asad's views and priorities on Iraq,

namely: safeguarding Iraq's territorial integrity and the welfare of its people; and guaranteeing Iraqi independence.

SARG THINKING RE IRAQ

¶4. (C) Muallem said Iraq's independence could best be supported by bringing to the fore the Arab-Islamic nature of Iraq as a way to help contain worsening sectarian violence, establishing an Iraqi army on a national basis rather than along sectarian lines, amending the Iraqi constitution to alleviate concerns about possible disintegration, ensuring the government takes on a clearly national vice religious character, reviewing de-Baathification laws to help stem the insurgency supported by former government officials, disarming and disbanding militias, and establishing a calendar for the departure of international troops. Onal said the SARG's position on the final point was to synchronize the withdrawal of foreign troops with the completion of adequate training of Iraqi troops so as not to create or contribute to instability.

THE NEIGHBORING COUNTRY INITIATIVE

¶5. (C) Onal underscored that Turkey continues to press forward with the "neighboring countries initiative" which brings Iraq's regional neighbors together with the GOI with the goal of ensuring all of them are working to keep Iraq united, eschewing "divisive policies," and supporting the strengthening of Iraq's security forces. He indicated the GOT hopes this initiative can, at some point, be linked to the P-5 to provide a broader level of international support

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for these goals and noted that Muallem and the SARG support that linkage.

LEBANON/PALESTINIANS

¶6. (C) Muallem also discussed factional fighting among the Palestinians and the situation in Lebanon. He described SARG efforts (together with Qatar) to help Fatah and Hamas reach an understanding on a Palestinian government of national unity, which had been unsuccessful to date. Onal reported that Muallem also noted the SARG had been trying to "influence" the Lebanese opposition to stop its destabilization of PM Siniora's government but that, according to Muallem, they (the opposition) "seem to be determined to push for early elections." Onal said Muallem conveyed the SARG's belief that the tribunal designed to investigate political assassinations in Lebanon was the crucial outstanding issue that, if solved, would probably allow for all other outstanding issues to be resolved. Onal noted the SARG signaled its support for Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's idea to form a commission to look at jurisdictional issues related to the tribunal, relaying SARG concerns that the body "deal with legal and technical issues instead of political ones." Onal also passed on PM Erdogan's concern as expressed to Muallem that Lebanese leaders were taking an "emotional vice rational approach" and were in danger of setting into motion events that they would then be unable to control.

WE LIKE YOU BETTER THAN IRAN

¶7. (C) Finally, Onal described Muallem's effort to convey at each of his meetings the importance the SARG attaches to its relationship with Turkey as well as how the SARG's interests diverge from those of Iran. Pointing to the different sectarian make-up of majority Sunni Syria and majority Shia Iran, as well as to the Islamist nature of the Iranian regime compared to the sectarianism of the SARG, Muallem said it should be clear "there is not 100 percent convergence between

Syria and Iran." In fact, Muallem emphasized the SARG's view that Turkish-Syrian relations were far better now than Syrian-Iranian ties, and that the SARG's relationship with Iran in recent years had been a "natural consequence of the West's policy of isolation of Syria." Muallem said the SARG now looked more to Turkey to help solve regional issues that destabilize all countries in the Middle East.

18. (C) COMMENT: Muallem's visit was the latest in a series of visits by senior officials from both countries in recent months. We are hard-pressed to find anything ground-breaking in what Muallem discussed while in Ankara, but the fact that the visit occurred - as well as the high-level reception Muallem was given - seem to fit into the longer-term effort by both countries to engage one another more regularly. While Syria looks to end its isolation in any way that it can and sees Turkey as the most convenient means to do so, the GOT's primary motivation is its overriding fear of what continued instability in the region might mean for Turkey. Turkey is prepared to work with all its neighbors to prevent sectarianism and extremism from consuming the entire region, sees merit in trying to end the Damascus-Tehran axis, and believes it preferable to work with the devil it knows (Asad) rather than with one it does not.

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